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Panther Sports News

EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY - Charleston, IL 61920
217/581-5981

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE (April 20)

CHARLESTON, IL.--Eastern Illinois University football coach BOB SPOO says defense wins championships. He emphasized that during his introductory press conference in January.

The man charged with the responsibility of molding that defense is JOHN SMITH, who coached previously with SPOO at Wisconsin and since has been directing defensive teams at Northeast Missouri and Western Illinois.

With only three fulltime returning starters, SMITH'S initial goal during spring practice has been "developing a more aggressive attitude. . . we want a make-it-happen type defense.

"The 'bend but don't break' philosophy is good if you have an offense that can move it down the field consistently. But with the Paytons and Banks gone, we must now have a defense that can make it happen . . . and I've been pleased with the progress," SMITH said.

The three returning starters are defensive lineman CARL PARKER, linebacker JEFF MILLS and cornerback ROD REYNOLDS. MILLS led the team with 129 tackles last year while REYNOLDS was a Second Team All-Gateway Conference pick.

"We are lacking depth and we don't a great number of skill players. We're going to have to get it done with emotion . . . with everyone flying around the field."

SMITH also cannot deny the loss of EIU's only true All-American, defensive lineman JOHN JURKOVIC to knee surgery, complicates the matter. "That was devastating . . .like the offense losing a player the caliber of Payton or Banks."

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Still SMITH says the defensive line is "the most improved unit this spring compared to what I saw on film when I came here. This segment has to win the neutral zone for us to be effective."

With JURKOVIC out, the leadership role up front falls to CARL PARKER who is "great leader . . . I'm really pleased with his play."

TOM GOVAN, a Thornton CC transfer, has also made a good impression. "He'll battled with DAVE LEWANDOWSKI AND PAUL WILSON for a starting spot. JEFF ROLSON has also improved immensely."

If there is depth anywhere on this side of the ball it's at linebacker, Smith claims. MILLS has been injured all spring but SMITH is well aware of his capabilities. BILL COCHRANE, GEORGE BOYKIN AND MIKE BRISCOE are pushing each other for a starting spot.

SMITH'S foremost challenge may be the secondary, the segment he directly coaches, where five fulltime DBs are needed.

"The 'nickel' is our base system because it's a throwing league . . . it's forced me to adjust. At Northeast Missouri I used an odd man front with four deep mostly.

"I got spanked pretty good my first year at Western but the last three we utilized this system and had great success against the pass and still could hold up against the run," he explained. "Of course, we'll have to make some adjustments against opponents, such as Southwest Missouri, which are run oriented."

As spring nears an end, SMITH can pinpoint some secondary starters but hasn't seen everyone healthy at the same time. "Reynolds has been out with the chicken pox and hasn't been here much. KEVIN HUNTER has been out all spring with a foot problem.

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"DARYL HOLCOMBE really has some talent and has been a pleasant surprise. SCOTT JOHNSON is steady, intelligent. EUGENE HUMPHREY has practice everyday and what he lacks in talent, he makes up for in attitude and effort. RICH LABIAK and PASKLE JACKSON have shown at times they can play.

"Overall everyone has picked up the system quickly and shown a willingness to work. I can't say enough about the great attitude . . .and that, as much as anything, is what we stressed this spring."